

## Huh? Articulating Questions at the Speed of Conversation

Discussion moves fast. Do you find yourself fumbling to put a question into words as the conversation speeds past? Because of the pace of discussion, we often rely on a small set of short questions that are easy to put into words—questions like “Huh?” or “So?” And everyone knows the monosyllabic questions: *Who? What? Where? When? Why?* Questions like these have one advantage: they are very, very easy to put into words. The problem with these questions, of course, is that they convey very little precision. To do high quality work at the speed of conversation we need to become much more skilled at articulating what feels unclear or confusing in our minds.

In formal meetings or work settings, we often censor ourselves from asking imprecise questions like “How do you know?” in order to avoid looking stupid or creating a negative impression. It is difficult to ask precise questions of clarification at the speed of conversation. Difficult but important. If you are leaving a VP’s office with a new and complex assignment, or walking back to your car after a meeting with a key customer and you’re still confused, it may be too late.

The secret to asking precise questions at the speed of conversation is building a large vocabulary of precise questions that are near the tip of your tongue. Asking about trigger events or root causes needs to become as accessible as asking a generic: “Why?” Asking graph

questions or pivot-table questions needs to become almost as effortless as asking: “What do you mean?” A Precision Questioner knows how to quickly craft words that will address a growing sense of what is unclear or confusing in her mind.

The practice we recommend for developing your skill at articulating precise questions is what we call **SEVENTY QUESTIONS**. This is one of the best exercises we have found for strengthening the ability to verbalize precise questions at the speed of conversation. You can do it anywhere, anytime you have a moment. As you practice, you will discover that you are becoming faster at articulating precise questions.

## This Month’s Practices

As you listen to the news on the radio in your car, watch television, or read on the web, you will regularly hear reporters or commentators make an interesting claim. For example: Unemployment is falling. As soon as you hear a claim that interests you, turn off the news or stop reading the paper and begin.

**STEP 1:** Ask 5 questions from each category about the claim that you heard or read. Ask them one at a time, one after another, covering each category without stopping. Don’t use the generic form of the question (e.g. How do you know? What do you mean?). Review your PQ Toolkit—did you cover all the categories?

**STEP 2:** Return to the beginning claim and make sure it’s still clear in your mind. Go through each of the seven categories of questions again, but increase the number of questions you ask from each category to 10. The goal is to articulate 70 precise questions about the claim.

**STEP 3:** Pick a different claim. Ask 10 precise questions from each category about the claim. When you have asked 70 precise questions, pick a new claim and start again.

Store up some interesting claims so that you can practice next time you are stuck in traffic or waiting in line. Those are perfect opportunities for the power of **SEVENTY QUESTIONS!**

We’re here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at [QuestionMaster@vervago.com](mailto:QuestionMaster@vervago.com).

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at LinkedIn.